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LEIBNIZ'S LIFE AND WORK.

G OTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ was born on June 21, 1646, at Leipsic. His father and mother both belonged to what we may call the learned classes, and the Leibniz family had been known for some generations. The father of the philosopher was a notary and a professor of philosophy in the University of Leipsic. He had been married three times, Gottfried Wilhelm, born when his father was forty-nine, being the only son of his third wife. When Leibniz was six years old his father died, and his education during his school years was directed by his mother. In his autobiographical memoir he mentions the various obscure studies in which he seems to have delighted at an early age. He entered the University of Leipsic in 1661 as a student of law, having already read much in the classics and in scholastic philosophy. The title of his dissertation for the bachelor's degree (1663), *De principio individui*, marks his connection with the thought of Ockham and Nicholas de Cusa. He was apparently also affected by Raimundus Lullus, in his conception of symbolic logic and calculation. Owing to the officialism of those who granted degrees, Leibniz was unable to conclude his academic career at Leipsic and he therefore left his native Saxony never to return. Eventually he was made Doctor of Laws at Altorf near Nuremberg.

In this later period he seems to have come under the influence of Renaissance thought as it was in Bacon and

Hobbes, and he was affected by the mathematical conceptions of Descartes. His desire to know everything that he could led him to communicate with the Rosicrucians of Nuremberg, and in connection with them he dabbled in their form of chemistry which seems to have been a mixture of magic and learned jargon. But more important than this introduction to physical science was the meeting of Leibniz with the Baron von Boineburg, who had himself some interest in alchemy. The Baron induced Leibniz to leave Nuremberg with him for Frankfort, and there he was made a councillor of the supreme court of the Elector. From this time on Leibniz lived among courtiers and jurists.

It was at this period that he began his writings on jurisprudence, which he conceived should be systematized and made logical. He also began his philosophic writing with two tractates on motion, and at the request of his patron he brought out with an introduction an edition of a work by Marius Nizolius which is an attack, largely formal, upon the scholastics. The philosophical development of Leibniz will, however, be dealt with elsewhere, and here we shall confine attention to his more public activities.

The European situation at the end of the seventeenth century was unstable, owing in great part to the diplomatic device of the balance of power. Louis XIV loomed large, especially upon the German horizon and he appears to have been chiefly moved by that peculiar Renaissance myth—glory. After various pursuits of this intangible goal his activities so alarmed the Duke of Lorraine that in July 1670, the Duke attempted to form a league with the Electors of Mainz and Treves. It was suggested that England, Sweden and Holland should join the German states to prevent Louis from pursuing glory upon the banks of the Rhine. Leibniz was able to assist Boineburg in the nego-

tiations and he seems to have suggested a purely German league for defense against the military ambitions of France. It came to nothing. In the late summer, the duchy of Lorraine and the bishoprics were attacked and conquered by Louis, a beginning of evil still unended. Leibniz continued to urge the union of the German princes.

In 1672 he accompanied Boineburg to Paris, nominally upon private business of the Baron's, but in reality to attempt to turn the attention of the French king away from Germany and Holland. Leibniz had already worked out a scheme, which indeed had been suggested before, of an invasion of Egypt by Christian troops under the leadership of the French king. Glory, he conceived, might be there; and in any case Europe would be left in peace. The scheme was actually presented to and acknowledged by the foreign minister of Louis XIV, but nothing more was done in the matter. England and France attacked Holland—historians probably know why. At Paris, however, Leibniz continued, superintending the slow wits of the Baron's son and meeting various men of note and learning. At this time he seems first to have seriously studied mathematics and to have gone into the detail of the Cartesian philosophy.

From Paris he went with the Elector's ambassador for a short visit to London (January, 1673). The purpose of the embassy was to persuade Charles II to allow the interests of Germany to be considered in the treaty of peace with Holland. The request was refused, as it had been by Louis. But Leibniz took advantage of his visit to meet various learned men; and he was made a member of the Royal Society. We now hear for the first time of the work of Leibniz upon the higher mathematics. From 1675 to 1677 he was again in Paris and in 1676 completed his discovery of the differential calculus. Therein lay matter for controversy with Newton at a later date, but as it hardly

seems to be important which first made the discovery we may here avoid the issue. What is more interesting to remember is that Leibniz lived in London and Paris in the world of Christopher Wren and Robert Boyle, of Molière and Racine. There was a certain intellectual energy in the air which could not at that time be equaled anywhere else in the world.

In 1677 Leibniz left Paris. He had at one time thought of making his home there among the learned and the cultured, but an offer of a post in Hanover changed his plans. He visited London again for a week and then went on to Amsterdam and the Hague, where he met and conversed with Spinoza, and so to Hanover. For ten years he lived there as ducal librarian, and there he took up the task of collecting materials for a history of the house of Brunswick. But he was not to live retired. In the first place the European situation was again unsettled by the attack of Louis XIV upon Germany, in deliberate violation of a truce, on the obviously insincere plea that the Emperor was about to make peace with the Turks and might then turn his arms against France. The best defensive was known even then to be an offensive. The Revolution of 1688 in England gave new importance to the house of Hanover. Europe was thus already divided into Catholic and Protestant powers, which made utterly impossible the scheme of Leibniz and others for religious reunion.

From 1687 to 1691 Leibniz traveled to collect materials for his history in various parts of Germany and in Italy. He visited Venice, and at Rome was welcomed by various learned societies. There also he met learned Jesuits and heard of the missions in China, where he was given to understand there was much learning.¹ He paid a short visit to Naples and in 1689 reached Modena. But the new

¹ He suggests sarcastically in his letters that as the Europeans were sending missionaries to China to teach the truths of revelation, the Chinese should send missionaries to Europe to teach us the practice of natural religion.

stage in his life is marked chiefly by his connection with Berlin. He became what was practically a diplomatic agent there in 1700, and he wrote various political essays in support of Austria and of the making of Prussia into a kingdom. In Berlin also Leibniz met Christian Wolf, with whom he continued a correspondence from 1704 until his death, and who was recognized later as his philosophical successor.

We have an account of his personal appearance at about this date left by his secretary. He is said to have been a small man with broad shoulders and a slight stoop. His eyes were keen but small; his hair was originally dark but he had lost it all, and on his bald head there stood a bump the size of a pigeon's egg. It was, however, an age of wigs. His habits were ascetic. He slept little, and often in his chair without attempting to go to bed. He would go on with his reading even when suffering from an occasional illness. His emotional adventures were few, if at least we can judge from the fact that when he was fifty he proposed marriage to a lady who took time to consider it, whereupon Leibniz seized the opportunity to reconsider.

In public work the activity of Leibniz was of two kinds, diplomatic or juristic and academic. He conceived the idea of a logical jurisprudence, and his early attention seems to have been fixed upon the political situation. In 1659 he wrote an essay on the election of the king of the Poles, and in 1667 a *Nova methodus discendae docendaeque Jurisprudentiae*. His chief purpose, however, was exactness of definition and systematic treatment, and although he served in public life as a learned jurist and diplomat it is not in this sphere that he has contributed most.

Another public activity was his devotion to the religious reunion of Christendom. His attempts to reunite the Christian churches arose partly from his own training

and sentiments, partly no doubt from the fact that he was librarian at Hanover under the Catholic duke and under his successor the Protestant Ernst August. It was hardly a hundred years since the Reformation was established in the north and men of good will still shrank from taking it for granted that there must be divergence of religious forms and beliefs in Europe. Leibniz knew the scholastics and the best of the older Catholicism. He saw and appreciated the contemporary work of the Jesuits and he lived in the midst of a society very varied in its religion. Therefore he joined with enthusiasm those who hoped for some compromise between church officials and theologians of the old and the new schools. Most of his work was done by correspondence. On this subject he wrote to many Catholics, but the most important of his letters were addressed to Bossuet. The courtier bishop and theologian set out with great clearness the claims of the See of Rome. He said that Protestants were opinionated, that there was no evidence for Rome's ever having treated heretics as equals, and that the decrees of the Council of Trent could quite reasonably be accepted. Bossuet broke off the correspondence in 1694; but it was renewed and finally broken off by Leibniz in 1701. They could not agree, among other things, as to whether the Council of Trent should have introduced the Apocrypha into the Biblical canon.

Feeling ran fairly high even in the correspondence of scholars, although theological emotions had somewhat subsided since the days when the fathers of the Council of Trent pulled out each other's beards in an agony of excitement as to whether there was justification by faith only. Leibniz saw that the hope of any compromise grew less as each form of religion was more rigidly institutionalized, and doubtless those on the other side saw that the new churches lacked none of the assurance of the old. There was the added difficulty of political division more or less

corresponding to religious differences, and the German princes could hardly look with delight on the prospect of being catholicized by Louis XIV. So disagreement grew to discord and then to the silence which has divided for two hundred years the two great religious traditions of Europe.

Leibniz, however, was great enough to keep for himself some appreciation of what was best in the institution to which he dared not belong lest, as he said, it should stifle his thought. In a letter of 1691 he says, "You are right in regarding me as a Catholic at heart. I am one openly even, for it is only obstinacy that makes a heretic, and of this, thank God, my conscience does not accuse me. The essence of Catholicism consists not in external communion with the See of Rome... The true and essential communion which unites us to the body of Christ is love." The hopes for a religious reunion of Europe were based upon such sentiments as these, and although Leibniz was not ecclesiastically minded he might have done much for the future of Europe if this scheme had succeeded.

His public work in the conception and founding of academies was perhaps of more permanent and universal importance. To appreciate his position we must allow for the peculiarities of his age. In the first place there were ancient institutions representing the spiritual power of the Middle Ages at least on its intellectual side—the universities and the religious orders. The church at large could never have been the medium for intellectual progress, but it had within it a place for investigators, learned men and teachers. The universities still kept in Leibniz's day the form of the medieval *studia generalia*. They had been, however, for some years somewhat removed from the new currents of thought. They had become more and more formal in their view of learning, accepting the methods and matter of past knowledge and perpetuating them. In spite

of such brilliant accidents as Bacon and Hobbes or, in Leibniz's day, Newton, the universities were stiff with formulas. The religious orders in the Catholic countries were wealthy and their members had abundant leisure, but they had forgotten the possible connection of intelligence with religion. The older orders contained only commentators on the great scholastics, and the view taken of their duty to humanity was narrow and antiquated.

In Italy the custom had begun of cooperation between investigators, free from the traditions and the tutorial burdens—lightly borne indeed—of the universities. This is the origin of academies. They are the signs of the Renaissance, as universities are of the Middle Ages. They belong to the period of the humanists and polymaths and they lived on the appetite for new things which was only hampered by the mutual jealousy of their members. The Royal Society of London had been founded in 1660, the Paris Académie des Sciences in 1666; and it is with these two that Leibniz is chiefly connected. From his experience of their utility, he seems to have come to the conclusion that the idea of academies was valuable. Its importance for us here is largely historical, for academies have become, as universities had in Leibniz's day, opportunities for the mutual admiration of the obsolete. Their purpose, at least in the public mind, is rather to register the approval of established authorities than to give opportunity for new and fruitful departures from tradition. It is all the more important to recognize that they were once revolutionary intellectual associations, and it is as such that Leibniz looked to their principles as full of promise for the development of civilization.

Academies mark the new age in learning in two ways: In the first place an academy is a free association for investigation and the application of science to every-day needs and not for teaching or for explaining tradition.

This is one example of the mood of the Renaissance. The value set upon exceptional ability and the impulse to individual exploration in the intellectual as well as in the geographical world are here embodied. The famous Florentine Academy and the Roman Society which had an unfortunate notoriety under Paul II, were to their members, as they were to the public, associations of those who were willing and able to go beyond the known bounds of human knowledge. And the same spirit, less "pagan" on the one hand but more scientific on the other, was to be found in France and England during the late seventeenth century. The immense promise of the future gave the academies their best energy, and this promise could only be realized, it was felt, by individual or associated investigation into nature. Nothing could be more different from the spirit in which the universities had been founded: and in this spirit of progressive thought we have made but little advance upon the Renaissance enthusiasm.

In another sense the academies of Leibniz's day may be recognized as belonging to a stage of intellectual progress which has now been passed. We have seen that they are for the exceptional, by comparison to the universities. But on the other hand the Renaissance, even as late as the seventeenth century, was a period in which civilization depended upon a small clique in a world of uneducated and half brutalized "workers." Perhaps that world has not altogether disappeared. The position, however, of Descartes, Leibniz, and most scholars or scientists of the seventeenth century, could hardly be paralleled in our days. It is the position of courtiers, dependents and hangers-on of "great" men. Academies, indeed, still preserve the memory of their dependence upon favor as universities still preserve their old connection with the clergy. But we should be doing the activity of Leibniz an injustice if we did not allow for the limitations within which he worked.

The "reading public" was small, and the centers of civilization few. In addition to the London and Paris of his day we have a world-wide connection of great cities, and in place of his unwashed and semi-educated patrons we have vast numbers of men and women quite capable of appreciating a new scientific or literary idea. His achievement must, therefore, be measured by reference to the slender resources at his disposal, and we must imagine him rather a pioneer in the work of civilizing humanity than an exponent of all that may be done in that high task.

Leibniz was introduced to the Royal Society as a member in 1673; and he began his communications with the Paris Académie in 1675; though he could not become a member, as he was a Protestant. Both societies were looked upon as the very latest thing in learning and their members were often laughed at for their fantastic ideas. Swift's *Gulliver* and Butler's *Hudibras* contain the contemporary popular view of the practical applications of this new science.

Such was the institutional organization of learning. On the other hand, knowledge had vastly increased since the universities arose and was still increasing too quickly for the academies to assimilate or systematize it. We must, indeed, allow that there was much in the material valued by the academies which has eventually turned out worthless, although it is from what they collected that the most valuable part of our science arose. We must imagine a time when scholars spent as much time in devising a machine for making calculations as in elaborating the new mathematics. Out of such facts come the enthusiasm of Leibniz for organized learning. And this does not make him simply a passive agent of the vague needs of his time, for it required no little insight to grasp the situation and to suggest an advance.

The first need which appealed to Leibniz was that of systematization. He was himself, as we have seen, vastly learned, and he was also one of those few men whose reasoning had not been overcome by his learning. He was master of his "subjects," not they of him, and the much he had only gave him an appetite for more. But before his eyes there stretched the unlimited details of acquired learning then possessed by the scholars and the illimitable vistas of possible increase. He must have felt, first, like that librarian of Anatole France who pulled down upon himself his own catalog and died of it. And next, in the jungle of "facts" he felt himself helpless even to utilize what he knew was there. "We are poor," he writes, "in the midst of riches, and we are hampered by the excess of our resources." The primary need, therefore, was a system of the sciences. Of this there are two renderings in Leibniz, belonging to different stages in the development of his own conceptions. The former begins with theological and moral science and hardly includes what we should call physical science. The second plan gives theology and morality a much more restricted space and is chiefly concerned with what we should call science and history. This marks the change of emphasis in Leibniz's mind as he moved more and more towards mathematics and the new methods of thought.

During all this time Leibniz was attempting to establish some exact and universally valid symbolism or notation in philosophy such as was already established for algebra. This would be, as he continually says, a thread of Ariadne in the labyrinth of acquired knowledge. He hoped, as most men did then, for a geometrically exact philosophy. But we may put this aside for special treatment when the relations of Leibniz with Descartes are considered. What is important here is that before he

attacked the problem of academies he was planning an encyclopedia and a universal philosophic symbolism.

Along with plans for the systematization of knowledge went plans for the association of the learned. We have already seen that academies were a product of the age. Leibniz makes the following changes in the conceptions of their structure and purpose. First he is convinced that a society should be founded of an almost religious nature to promote for human good the cooperation of the learned and the thinkers; and, secondly, he looks forward to an international association of all those who love intellectual pursuits.

First, then, Leibniz proposed to the Royal Society of London to take up his idea of a cooperative encyclopedia of knowledge. There was no definite result. Leibniz had been affected by English influences,² and as late as 1680 he hoped that the Royal Society would act. "You will not find anywhere nowadays a better store of fine intelligence than I know of in England." So Leibniz writes. But not even compliments could make the work of the Royal Society really cooperative. Leibniz also tried the Académie at Paris with a like absence of result. He appealed to Louis XIV to found such a society as he was planning, and he hoped to persuade persons of power in the world to believe in the utility of knowledge. The only success he seems to have had was in that he contrived to make the Duke of Brunswick purchase in 1678 the secret of the making of phosphorus. Leibniz turned also to the learned and tried to persuade them to cooperate, independently of patronage. But whether because of mutual jealousy, an atavism not purged by learning, or because the majority could not see anything but their own subject, the learned

² Chiefly the *Plus Ultra* of Glanville (1636-1680) and the plan for a universal language by Wilkins.

were as irresponsible as the princes, and Leibniz's ideal society was never founded.

It is worth while for us, however, to remember his plan. He had been much impressed by the religious orders in Paris and especially by the Jesuits. They had riches and organization and they worked independently of local or national interests for the "eternal welfare" of men. Why should there not then be, said Leibniz, an order of the intelligent and learned, "in which besides religion the happiness of men in the present world should be arrived at?"³ Such a society would be "philadelphic," and could not be founded except with some religious enthusiasm:⁴ but it would have the devotedness and the organization of the Society of Jesus, without the rigidity of rule and the concentration upon authority. It would be an *Internationale des Savants*,—a spiritual power. Its members would preserve and increase our knowledge of the secrets of nature and they would study and publish knowledge of public utility.

The various appliances which might be invented are hinted at in Leibniz's attempt to make a machine for pumping the water out of mines, and another for controlling fire. He proposed the conservation of forests, the institution of a metric system of weights and measures, and various other practical reforms. His conception of the society of Wise Men is like that of Bacon's college in the New Atlantis. There was here the common Renaissance forecast of the elaborate machinery we have now at our disposal. But Leibniz perceived that unless an international society with humanitarian interest were devoted to this purpose, the growth of knowledge would be retarded and in its practical applications it would be enslaved to the prejudices and pettinesses of local lords or rival factions.

³ Cf. letter quoted in Couturat, 1901, p. 507, note 3.

⁴ "Societatis talis stabiliri nulla melius ratione posset quam religionis conspiracione."

And so indeed it has been. Those who know do not rule, but their knowledge is controlled by those whose only use for "science" is to attain more violently their primitive purposes. Leibniz foresaw what we know, that explosives and engines of destruction are first sought and more easily made effective than contrivances for making labor lighter or life more pleasant. We still use the houses of his century but we have discarded its guns as unworthy of us. The spiritual power is still longed for by the French political theorists. The Internationale was never founded.

But Leibniz's ideals were not altogether without practical effect. He saw with regret that Germany was without any society such as the Royal Society or the Académie des Sciences. He therefore suggested an academy at Berlin, pointing out both the practical utility of such a society and the prestige it would give. For nine years he worked at making the authorities accept the idea, and the Berlin Academy was at last established in 1711 (Jan. 19). Leibniz's work was a direct evidence of the dependence of the civilization of one country upon the advance made in others. It was not simply as a rival that the Berlin Academy was brought into existence but in order that the progress initiated in France and England should be assisted in Germany.

He would have contrived the foundation of another such society at Dresden but for the war with Charles XII of Sweden. At Vienna, Leibniz tried from 1712 to 1714 to obtain the support of the Emperor for an academy. He even suggested the possibility of its depending, according to the English plan, upon the subscriptions of its members, with some slight subvention from the funds for hospitals, etc. Being a Protestant, he had to declare that he did not desire to be president of the proposed society; but no concession could buy off the suspicion and even the open hostility of the Jesuits, who were strong enough to prevent the

Academy of Vienna from being founded. Leibniz, however, continued for some years to reside in Vienna, and his influence at least brought some recognition for unclesiastical learning. He was able also at this period to affect the new civilization of Russia.

Leibniz had met Czar Peter at Hanover in July, 1697. The Czar had come, practically in disguise, as a member of his own embassy, and he was evidently open to new ideas. In 1708 Leibniz suggested to him the formation of a scientific society in Russia; but the war with the Turks prevented any action being taken.⁵ Leibniz, as usual, made a note of the subjects to which such a society, in view of its surroundings, could specially devote itself. He suggested that geography would be most naturally the chief task of a Russian society, considering the vast unknown upon which Russia bordered. Thus in his mind there was an intimate connection between the foundation of national academies and the special work of each for the general good of all men.

So far we have seen how Leibniz suggested a religious or humanitarian task to be adopted by established societies, and then urged with partial success the formation of different new local or national societies. But he had all along kept before him the ideal of an international union of men "of learning and of good will." Thus in May, 1696, he wrote to Placcius: "Nothing is more useful than the union of the learned in societies. It would be best that there should be one such universal society divided as it were into distinct colleges. For such is the connection between the different parts of knowledge that only by mutual friendliness and assistance can they be made to progress." And again in October, 1697, he wrote: "So long as something valuable is done, I do not care whether it be done in Germany or in France, for I desire the good of the whole

⁵ A society was, however, founded in 1724 at St. Petersburg.

human race. I am not a lover of Greece or Rome but of man."⁶

It is sufficiently obvious, then, that Leibniz although an active supporter of scientific progress in different countries, was a convinced internationalist. He does not conceive the two attitudes to be inconsistent, since in every step forward made by separate nations he saw a promise of good for the whole human race. But events since Leibniz's day have gradually obscured the more comprehensive ideal, and the primitive jealousies of different racial groups have taken control of science and even of the resources of art. Progress has been more rapid in those applications of science which divide men from one another. History and literature have become in every nation an *apologia* or a *panegyric* of that nation. The current of events was directed not by the plan of idealists but by the appetite of princes. Leibniz himself was not unaffected. In 1707 he was sent on a secret mission to Charles XII of Sweden who was at that time pursuing glory in Auerstadt near Leipsic; and Leibniz's scholarship was used by the Emperor for political writing about the situation following the Peace of Utrecht.

During all this time Leibniz had been continuing his official work upon the chronicles of the house of Brunswick. He speaks of the *mille distractions* of his life, which kept him from philosophy, and he complains to his friends that "at a court nothing like philosophy is wanted or asked for."⁷ He had, however, written the *Nouveaux Essais* in 1704, and in 1710 the *Theodicée*. From 1711 until 1714 he lived chiefly at Vienna and there, in about 1712, he was made an imperial privy councillor and a baron. The *Monadologie* was written in 1714, to be presented to Prince Eugene: and when Leibniz returned to Hanover in that

⁶ "Je suis non pas φιλέλλην ou φιλορωμαῖος, mais φιλάνθρωπος."

⁷ Letter to Placcius, 1695, "in aulis scis longe aliud quaeri atque exspectari."

year he found that the Elector had left, owing to the death of Queen Anne in England. Leibniz had hopes of following his patron to London, and had in fact thought some years before that he would find in London more congenial companionship than in Hanover. But the Elector, now king of England, told the philosopher to go on with his writing of the history of the house of Brunswick. Unfortunately Leibniz had expressed his opinion some time before that the customs of the English should not be interfered with by their king, and the Hanoverian ministers viewed his possible liberalism as a danger. A legend says that George I was proud of having a Leibniz in one of his dominions and a Newton in the other; at any rate he kept them apart.

A form of arthritis, from which Leibniz had suffered for some years and to which his sedentary habits contributed, became more acute in 1715. The history of the house of Brunswick was, however, prepared in that year for publication.

Leibniz died on November 14, 1716. At his deathbed no clergy attended as he had seldom or never been to church, and no one but his secretary followed his body to the grave. The court was aware of the little value set by George I upon a mere historian of his greatness. No notice was taken of his death, even by the learned, except that a decorative oration was pronounced upon him in the Académie des Sciences of Paris. Berlin and London made no sign.

The impression made by Leibniz on his contemporaries seems not to have been very great, or it may be that the unfortunate controversy with Newton prevented his being judged rightly by the English scholars who would perhaps best have appreciated his work. Upon his own countrymen the work of Leibniz made no impression for many years after his death. He lived among courtiers and de-

pended for his livelihood upon what could be spared by princes after their expenditure in the pursuit of warlike glory. He suffered for his security. The state in the years since the Middle Ages has taken credit to itself for supporting art and science, as the church in earlier times is supposed to have done. The evidence for each claim is equally lacking.

In general character Leibniz seems to have been pleasant and not striking. In intellectual interest he is the representative of the old tradition of omniscient humanists who intervened between medieval scholasticism and modern thought. Devoutly religious in the untheological sense, he endeavored always to keep hold of the tradition of those who believed in the goodness of God. He does not seem to have experienced the heights or the depths of emotion, although he greatly valued Plato. But it is no small credit to his genius that he was able to see so keenly into the nature of things through the elegancies and sentimental egoisms of court life. And his human sympathy was far-seeing and comprehensive.

C. DELISLE BURNS.

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